

Touchpoint

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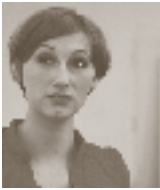
The Change Agent's Secret...

...And How to Instil It in Organisations



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As service designers and catalysts of change in organisations, we have all observed how perceived barriers impede progress, even where progress is possible. We find would-be change agents, bursting with vivid ideas of what they would accomplish if only positioning, resource allocation, time pressure or availability of information were otherwise.

Because the ‘if only ____ were otherwise’ position implies untapped potential, it is great fun to challenge it: think of a change agent (i.e. an individual or group) whose initiatives gain traction and whose visions materialise. Consider whether that change agent’s path really is paved with ample funding and uncontested authority. Consider whether, for that change agent, offers of information and collaboration really are forthcoming every step of the way.

The answer is likely to be no. What sets the change agent apart from the would-be one is not an absence of barriers – it’s the instinct to circumvent them. As service designers, our mission is not merely to distinguish the would-be from the actual change agent, it’s to transform the one into the other.

Our service design intervention at Swindon Borough Council provided an ideal setting for this sort of transformation. Initially, the council engaged us to

help design a service that would intensify engagement with the local community. As we immersed ourselves in the problem space, we found a series of dedicated local engagement projects already operating.

Although there was no shortage of local engagement projects within the council, the absence of collaboration between them was striking. Precious insights remained confined to the projects in which they were generated while projects with complementary missions carried out their work in isolation. We delved into the causes.

Barriers abounded. Organisational lines separated complementary projects. The inclination to exchange insights across projects was trumped by a presumption that fellow projects were competitors. In interviews, council members were more likely to focus on the differences in mandate and approach of fellow projects than on the overlap in their objectives. Few communication channels connected

departments, and even where communication channels were open, a sentiment prevailed that there simply wasn't enough time to absorb and impart insight.

We envisioned a council with an integrated service interface to the communities of the borough: a council capable of coordinating service initiatives so that they evolve with the needs and realities of the borough's population. But, in reality, the border between the council and the borough it served mimicked its internal borders.

The council's ability to intensify engagement with the local community turned on its ability to intensify engagement internally. So the real problem of intensifying local engagement demanded an underlying mission: evolve a culture of learning and collaboration across the council. The resolve of the council's management and the drive of its practitioners presented exactly this opportunity.

We introduced techniques and approaches that empowered an internal team of council members. The project they implemented would spark curiosity in activities across the council. It would encourage individuals to expand their

perspective on the council's work and cultivate an impulse to share insights across projects. It would dislodge insights from the projects in which they were generated and create channels for them to circulate. The council members called the project '360'.

The 360 team re-purposed a storage room as a dedicated work space. Together, we took down old posters, removed unused furniture, bought supplies and painted the walls. The exercise, quite literally, built up the initiative.

Together with the 360 team, we designed an intervention that would bring to light perceived barriers, challenge ingrained mindsets and forge new work practices. And it would do so by inciting action.

The 360 intervention kicked off with a bright green envelope. Participants from across lateral and hierarchical divisions received one envelope a day. On each day, the envelope contained a different mission, e.g. "Take something you do routinely, and do it differently today. Make sure someone benefits from it" and a different mindset such as "Be curious, ask why." Participants were encouraged to integrate both the mission and the mindset of the day into their practice and record their experience in a diary.



During the interventional research, the participants were asked to solve different tasks which challenged their ingrained behaviour.

“The day that participants were asked to gather colleagues from different departments and levels of hierarchy together in a game of skipping rope was telling.”

The 360 team was able to observe ingrained behaviour by prompting people to change. When participants incorporated the missions into their practice, inroads into cultural change were forged. When participants pushed back, barriers were exposed.

We imparted techniques to instil in the 360 team the capacity to capture perspectives and synthesise the inputs of participants. The team analysed each diary and facilitated dialogue with participants. From the outputs of the intervention research, the 360 team distilled four systemic barriers that called for change.

1. Communication
2. Idea management
3. Time pressure
4. Relationships and networking

In keeping with the cultural transformation that the intervention was designed to bring about, the 360 team elicited ideas to remedy these issues from within the council itself.

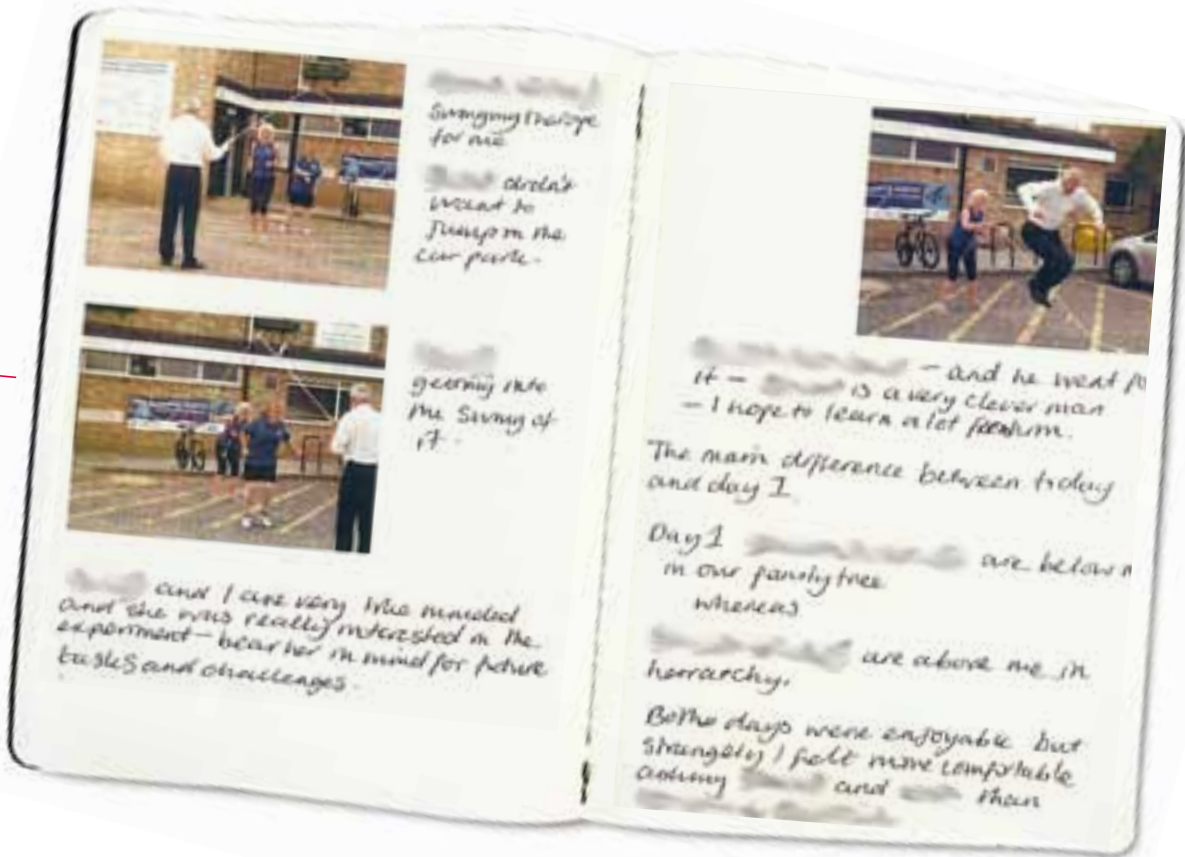
Through a series of workshops, the team empowered organisation members to conceive of ways to address the barriers. As with the intervention research, workshops participants spanned departments and hierarchies.

To set an enabling tone at the outset, the 360 facilitators bestowed superpowers corresponding to perceived barriers. Those who felt that a lack of budget precluded initiatives got money-printing power. Those who doubted that it was possible to garner buy-in for their initiative got the power of persuasion. Those who felt hindered by time pressure got the power of speed.

Charged with these superpowers, participants were tasked to address one of the four barriers / opportunity areas. To stimulate lateral thought, they were asked to consider team dynamics within different, but analogous, professions. The group addressing time pressure, for instance, was asked to consider what enables an emergency hospital team to progress under constant time pressure.

Participants presented the concepts that they had developed in a way that challenged conventional modes of communication in the council. One group created a news report, and another presented in song. The twist awakened participants to the many forms of communicating ideas with impact.

The exercise made visible a wealth of concepts – memorable because of their novelty, but also because of their feasibility. The time pressure group devised concepts for an internal help



desk, admin bin and a staff time bank. The relationships group conceived blind dates for lunch and job swaps. The communication group conceived an internal news channel and a 'Like' button, while the idea management group advanced 'idea flea markets' and 'idea flash mobs'.

The 360 intervention challenged perceived barriers to building initiatives by building an initiative. The wider organisation was able to observe it being conceived, sparking interest, eliciting participation, gaining traction and eventually being brought before the corporate board and chief executive. The phenomenon instilled a sense that the barriers to launching an initiative are surmountable.

The project countered barriers to collaboration by cultivating curiosity in a

system-wide perspective and an impulse to share insights. Participants came to consider the 360 intervention as "...a constant reminder of the importance of sharing, reflection and curiosity."

The team bridged lateral and hierarchical divides by engaging collaborators across multiple functions and levels and creating a venue where they could mix. The intervention research prompted action that pushed the limits of routine work practices. Participants felt encouraged "to do more, to go further, and to be open to change."

The research synthesis brought to light significant barriers and reframed them as opportunities, while the workshops empowered participants to devise novel ways of addressing barriers. Participants ultimately saw the intervention as a "methodology and way of being that [shifted] the broken bits of the system into something better." ●